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Interview

Exploring fandom and the performance paradigm: An interview with Kurt Lancaster, author of *Interacting with "Babylon 5"*

Paul J. Booth

DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, United States

Lucy Bennett

Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom

[0.1] *Abstract*—This interview with Kurt Lancaster, conducted via e-mail in August 2014, discusses the use of the performance studies paradigm in his *Interacting with "Babylon 5": Fan Performances in a Media Universe* (University of Texas Press, 2001).

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fandom; Games; Performance; Role-play

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1. *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* and the performance paradigm of fan studies

[1.1] Kurt Lancaster's *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* (2001) represents one of the first explorations of a performance studies view of fandom. Breaking from the textual poaching metaphor of fandom pioneered by Henry Jenkins (1992), Lancaster's performance studies paradigm as applied to fandom reveals the generation of meaning through fan play and participation outside of the primary media text. By investigating and analyzing the way that fans used games, fan fiction, computer programs, and other paratextual elements "to 'visit' and perform [moments] from [and around] episodes of *Babylon 5*," Lancaster developed a comprehensive view of how fans can "immerse themselves in this universe" (67). In this interview with Lancaster, we discuss how a performance

studies paradigm refreshes and revitalizes fan studies today, as the types of performances discussed in *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* are today becoming more conventional fan activities.

[1.2] As digital technology and interactive media have become commonplace within the media environment, new ways of addressing fan activities become not only relevant but also necessary for understanding the complex interactions between fans, media producers, and media texts. Indeed, in his foreword to Lancaster's book, Henry Jenkins (2001) notes that performance studies, a paradigm-breaking methodology for studying fans and fandom, "proves especially effective at identifying the space for improvisation opened up by various forms of interactive entertainment" (xx). New technology and styles of fandom today invigorate this paradigm, as highly interactive digital media like video games become popular paratexts, conventions like Comic-Con host thousands upon thousands of fans, and alternate reality games ludify real life for fans. As Lancaster writes:

[1.3] In these kinds of performances [the performances of fans playing games, writing fan fiction, role-playing characters, or simulating combat] participants' activities and desires intertwine within the functional characteristics of the environment. This is why people are required to bring a different kind of sensibility to them from what they are used to experiencing when watching television or reading a novel. People in conventional entertainment forms participate vicariously through another's performance...So-called immersive performances...require different kind of participatory technique—participants have to actively engage the site as performers. (32–33)

[1.4] Performance studies draws from theater, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, and history, among other disciplines; it is tied to an understanding of the practices that revolve around the presentation of a particular identity, activity, or custom. Performance is always something that we *do*. Fandom is a type of performance, as fans actively perform their identity in a variety of ways. At the same time, particular activities within fandom—playing games, writing fan fiction, vidding—reveal the performances at the heart of media viewership as well.

[1.5] These fan performances can take many directions. Some fans revel in dressing up as their favorite characters (cosplay), play board games based on

their favorite texts, or even LARP (live-action role-play). All of these performances become "immersion in an imaginary entertainment environment" (Lancaster 2001, 5). The performance studies paradigm highlights not just formal sites of performance (theater, film, television) but also the smaller, more intimate sites of performance we all encounter on a daily basis—"in game stores, at schools, or in the living rooms of people's homes are where human beings are expressing their deepest desires" (33). Lancaster's work on performance inherently changes the way fans are viewed in fan studies—from audiences to co-creators, from viewers to doers.

[1.6] With J. Michael Straczynski's announcement of new *Babylon 5* feature film reboot (Munn 2014), it may be that the television show, which originally ran from 1993 to 1998, will find a resurgence in popularity on television and in DVD sales. However, beyond *Babylon 5*, performance studies has significantly changed the face of fan studies. In the following interview, which we conducted in August 2014 over e-mail, we asked Lancaster to expand on his use of performance studies as a methodology and to apply his discussion of fan performance in contemporary settings. Although Lancaster no longer focuses on fandom or fan studies in his research (having moved to documentary production), his work has had a major impact on the development of the discipline and continues to inspire and challenge fan scholars today.

2. Back to *Babylon*: Interview with Kurt Lancaster

[2.1] **Q:** Since *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* was published, how much have you kept up with *Babylon 5* fandom?

[2.2] **A:** My teaching focus doesn't allow for much fan studies. I've only stayed on the edges, since my main focus has been on cinematic production work and the DSLR [digital single-lens reflex camera] revolution with *DSLR Cinema*, *Cinema Raw*, and *Video Journalism for the Web*. I have not come across as much *Babylon 5* fandom as I do with *Star Wars* (1977–2005) or *Star Trek* (1966–69).

[2.3] **Q:** You published *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* in 2001 at the burgeoning stages of social media. In the book you talk about Web sites and fans' online textual poaching. In what ways do you think social media has developed, or even countered, some of the threads you develop in this analysis, including performance of character through fan fiction or through MUSH [multiuser shared hallucination, or fic based on multiplayer online games] fiction?

[2.4] **A:** If anything the performance elements have expanded. Computer games and online massive role-playing games, the technology, has taken over most of the other forms, but there's still more card and board games being published. In these types of games the performance isn't really about taking on a role but taking on the embedded strips of media behavior found in these games. Someone who isn't a *Star Wars* fan, for example, isn't likely going to play Fantasy Flight Game's *X-Wing* board game (2012). But those who do play imaginatively perform in George Lucas's universe—they become a part of it and by extension create their own stories within that universe, so it is no longer Lucas's dream but the dreams of all of the fans in this collective and collaborative storytelling universe.

[2.5] In computer games, environments are getting more realistic, so if you're participating in the *Star Wars* MMORPG [massive multiplayer online role-playing game], for example, the environments, the sound design, and the characters you play evoke the visual tropes originally found in the films. The game designers consciously utilize these tropes so when players enter that realm, it is as if they're performing in that universe. Their movie—as a dream state, the special effects, the sound effects, the emotional impact of the story—becomes reimagined through these games and helps create the immersion. It is these embedded elements from the film that get performed in the minds of the players as a point of inspiration as they engage in the universe.

[2.6] I think there's less fan fiction and more games and more fan films going on today. The games tend to promote the mainstream views of the films, and there's not as much alternative storytelling as you'll find in fan fiction—at least I haven't encountered any. The fan films allow young filmmakers to not only perform in the universe, perhaps playing a Han Solo type, but they also get to perform roles as the director—as if they're like George Lucas. So the Lucas role as filmmaker becomes embedded as performance tropes in these fans as well.

[2.7] **Q:** Obviously *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* is very much centered on Straczynski's show and draws from your own experiences with it and with its fandom, as well as with the games you cover. Does one have to draw from their own experiences (regarding acafandom) in order to discuss these themes of fandom, performance, and immersion in a fictional world? How would such a work look if it were more observational and less affective?

[2.8] **A:** I think that critics think they know what computer games and role-

playing games are like. Experience is vastly different than performance made by observation. If you're an anthropologist, you don't sit back and observe a film or television show and say you're getting to know a particular subculture. You need to go there and become a participant-observer—but you still maintain your critical stance, because that's how you're trained. If you call yourself a filmmaker, you can't just watch movies. You have to actually pick up a camera and shoot something, then edit it. You need to understand storytelling. I sat on a thesis defense for a master's student in anthropology recently. He documented a Muslim community in LA that accepted gay members. He didn't just e-mail or interview members. He participated. He shot a documentary. He recorded events for the organization. He was a participant-observer. Could he have written about this community without participating, such as through e-mail and maybe an in-person interview? Yes. But the scholarship could never have been as rich as one who participates. You want to understand a computer game? You've got to sit down and play. You want to understand *Magic: The Gathering* (Wizards of the Coast, 1993) tournaments? Enter a tournament and play, so when you do talk to people, you're coming from a place of understanding. You can't just sit back and observe.

[2.9] **Q:** When we first read *Interacting with "Babylon 5,"* we were taken by the way you approach games seriously as areas of performance, with players of games role-playing and articulating their own positions within the shared universe of *Babylon 5*. As more complex board games are being developed around science fiction programming (e.g., *Battlestar Galactica* [Fantasy Flight Games, 2008], *Star Trek: Expeditions* [WizKids Games, 2011]), do you see board games shaping fan interaction?

[2.10] **A:** A lot of the fantasy board games based on multiple universes are based on what Dan Mackay (2001) calls the imaginary entertainment environment or what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls media convergence. They're taking off. You can buy games as if you're flying an X-Wing fighter. Instead of a computer game that brings you realistic simulation, you're sold miniatures and engage in fighter combat. Back in the 1980s, the Avalon Hill Game Company introduced fighter combat simulation, as well as other types of war-based board games. They never revolved around existing fantasy universes. The new ones, such as Fantasy Flight Games, tap into a variety of universes, including *Conan*, *Game of Thrones*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *The Hobbit*, to name a few. They build online community forums. For example, the Game of Thrones Living Card Game forum contains over 9,200 topics and nearly 71,000 replies. That's

engagement. Game companies are hyperaware of building online communities in order to maintain and build a fan base.

[2.11] **Q:** Fan studies has remained particularly wedded to the fans-as-poachers model rather than a performance studies model, although with some exceptions, like Francesca Coppa's (2006) analysis of fan fiction as performance. Why do you think this is? What are some of the advantages of a performance model?

[2.12] **A:** Fans who poach are performing. The fans-as-poachers model is just one theoretical position. Performance studies engages multiple theories in understanding human behavior. The specific performance theories I utilized revolved around a case study (*Babylon 5*) that was never hugely popular. Scholars doing research may not be as aware of it since it's called *Interacting with "Babylon 5"*—that may not be as clear in what it contains. If I had used *The Lord of the Rings* as a model, then it may have been much bigger and I would have sold more books.

[2.13] The advantage of the performance model is twofold. It allows for an intrinsic understanding of how players engage the fantasy universe through the interface of the game, and it allows for an understanding of how they perform in that universe. Elements of performance theories allow us to learn how the game works and how we get immersed into the games. The fans-as-poachers model doesn't really allow us to understand the environment of the game. Treating text as text is different than examining how such texts may contain strips of embedded behavior that reinforce or induce performance in fans. But we're not talking about conventional performances either, such as an actor performing a role onstage or on screen. Fan players are not necessarily aware that they're performing, just as a person who is a fireman out of uniform isn't recognized as a fireman—but as soon as he puts on his gear, that costume, embedded with so many media tropes from television and films as well as our experience observing them at a parade or actually fighting a fire on the news, provides all the cultural codes needed for us to understand that this is a fireman. That's his performance. He's not taking on a role like an actor; he's taking on a sociocultural role that we associate as a fireman. In effect, his costume—as soon as he puts it on—is embedded with these media associations and from our living memories. That's the performance that gets enacted or is associated in our minds with the fireman. In many ways, the observer is performing the man's role by associating media memories onto him from their own imagination. The fireman, too, may perform

based on what he thinks is how a fireman should behave (perform) from his own media associations and lived memories. Understanding fan performance in this way helps us understand that they're not playing traditional acting roles but rather sociocultural roles. That's what performance studies can bring to the table.

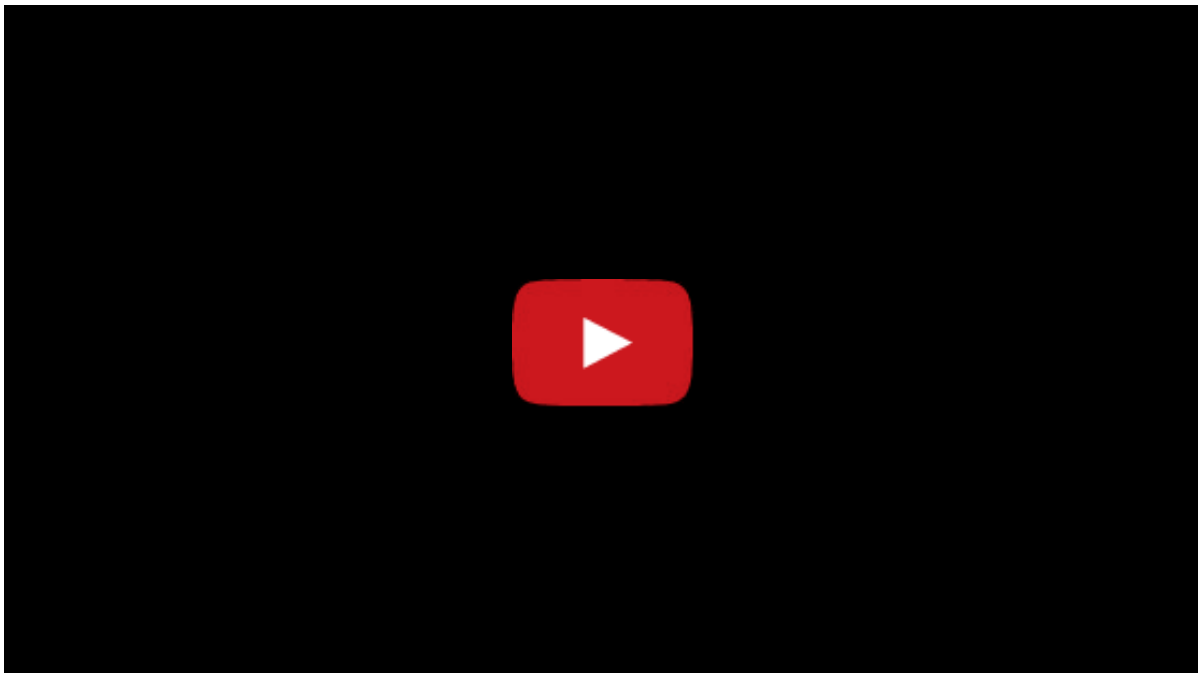
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1, based on the computer game *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007), reveals the nature of game movement actualized through film and the enactment of character through costume and his actions.



Video 1. *"Assassin's Creed Meets Parkour in Real Life" by devinsupertramp (2012).*

[2.16] Fandom is really about the need for adolescents to help find a purpose or a moral center in a postindustrial, postentertainment world that no longer

engages in liminal rites of passage that would typically help people to find their place in the social structure. By feeling an affinity for different fantasy environments—whether through novels, films, television, computer games, role-playing games, or board games—fans begin to discover a sense of purpose, and through interacting with others, they build a healthy social network. As adults, they maintain the ritual that helped shape their passions and identities, and it allows them to escape the mundane world—especially if they're living a job that doesn't really reflect who they are or wish to be.

[2.17] **Q:** *Interacting with "Babylon 5"* makes use of what you call the performance studies paradigm, a way of focusing contemporary culture through "different kinds of performances, irrespective of their cultural and social status in society" (xxix). In what ways does the performance studies paradigm function in today's media environment? Are there moments when it does not fit?

[2.18] **A:** The performance studies paradigm utilizes multiple models and multiple disciplines to examine how we live in the world, politically, socially, and culturally—so I think it always fits as a cutting-edge academic model that shifts us away from an academe of texts to an academe of lived experiences in a performative way. It doesn't look at static texts but at how we, as social performers, behave and live in the world. Some might argue that a media game, such as the board game *X-Wing*, is just a game, or that *Assassin's Creed* is just computer game entertainment. But when examined through the lens of the performance studies paradigm, we see it connected to a wider social and cultural sphere.

[2.19] When a group of fans make a movie like "Assassin's Creed Meets Parkour in Real Life" (video 1) together and create a short film that's just over two and a half minutes long, and it receives nearly 38 million hits on YouTube, performance studies is able to examine its social and cultural implications from a variety of perspectives that help us understand such a phenomenon. The experience of fans watching the film, making comments about it, attempting to mimic it—which is already an extended text from the computer game—helps create this short film to act as a living document. By this I mean that the fans make it come alive through their critique, praise, and other community-building experiences. It makes the universe of the game shift from the console of a living room computer game (73 million copies sold inclusive of its sequels) into a performance environment as people build online communities and create movies about the game. (There's a variety of story-based fan films, comic books, novels,

and so forth.) Remember that performance studies is really about a variety of theories spawned in sociology, anthropology, theater, semiotics, and cultural studies, among others, as a way of examining the social, cultural, and political structures of everyday life as a lived—or performed—experience. The saturation of media itself isn't necessarily a performance. Taking these media items and making things with them or playing with them—fan films, fiction, games, social interaction online, costumes at science fiction conventions—does make it a performance because it has moved from the private to the public. In the public sphere we find performances happening around us all the time.

[2.20] **Q:** You conclude in the book that "ultimately, the fans are the ones who determine the future history of the universe Straczynski created, for it is the stories they create that keep the imaginary universe of *Babylon 5* alive in the minds of its participants and thus in the wider culture" (xxxi). In this sense, and 13 years later, in what ways have *Babylon 5* fans been using digital media to remember the show and keep this imaginary universe alive?

[2.21] **A:** There's Facebook communities, fan fiction, and Twitter feeds, all keeping up with Straczynski's latest projects. Claudia Christian, the actress who played Ivonova, for example, interacts with fans online, including sending a birthday video with other B5 cast members (Andrea Thompson, Mira Furlan, Patricia Tallman) on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10152314589038581>). Her camera work is rough, and she says not to make fun of it. One of the fans makes a B5 reference by stating, "Make it a good 'un! As for the camera work: I think it is a highly original approach, simulating a Starfury pilot trying out all the possible manoeuvres..."

[2.22] Whether or not more B5 will be created isn't necessarily the issue—it's the fact that there's a fan base still interacting in the B5 universe through Facebook and Twitter, creating a community of like-minded people who love the show. It makes them feel like they're still a part of something that moved them. This occurs through all kinds of media, not just science fiction shows.

[2.23] **Q:** You focus in the book on media producer interaction with fans and provide the example of Straczynski being challenged by fan critics. How do you think, in this current climate, media producer and fan interactions are unfolding? Are we seeing a performance on this platform from both parties?

[2.24] **A:** Straczynski was the first to do it online at a consistent level. It takes dedication and time. (His online critics were few, with a lot more positive

comments about the series than negative.) It's a strong historical record of how a television series was produced at the time. I think we see similar interactions on a small, haphazard scale; I don't see anyone else posting as much as Straczynski. It's a much more organized phenomenon as the television industry has moved away from pure-film funding because of the high cost of production. The production goal in the past was to raise \$7 million with a \$2 million budget to make a viable product. The fan base of the series was the primary source of the production went forward.

[2.25] Producers creating fan films that are the result of loyal fans being convinced that its still a viable storytel re film for release by raising i ar

(<http://www.startrekaxanar.com/>), which includes cast members from both *Battlestar Galactica* series (1978–79, 2003–10) and *Star Trek* television series as a way to build the fan base (video 2). Without this community of fans, such projects wouldn't get made.



Video 2. "Star Trek: Axanar" Kickstarter video (2014).

[2.26] **Q:** In the preface to the book, you touch on how nonfans sometimes

perceive fan performance, such as engagement in role-playing games and other practices, in a negative manner. In what ways do you think, if at all, this has changed with digital fandom potentially making some of these practices more visible?

[2.27] **A:** Fan communities in game stores, such as a local game store called The Geekery here in Flagstaff, help mainstream the view, the performance. The Friday night *Magic* tournaments are full of performances. Now that there are many series that people watch—from Netflix's *House of Cards* (2013–) or HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–)—there's been a mainstreaming of media. This is really directly linked to the rise in smartphone and tablet use. People are building communities, communicating, engaging in all sorts of media from games to television series in public spaces, and it's discussed in public spaces. Comic-Con is considered to be a happening place. When I went to my first science fiction conventions in the late 1980s, it was not a mainstream event, as it is today. Those who dress up certainly see themselves as performers, but those who go to a game store and play games don't see themselves as performers. They're there to hang out, create friendships, build a community. A performance analysis sees the performance elements occurring there, but the fans don't see themselves in that way.

[2.28] **Q:** In what ways do you think video-sharing sites such as YouTube have affected fandom and performance?

[2.29] **A:** It's had a huge impact, as detailed above. It provides an outlet for fans to create films within their favorite fantasy environments, which of course media corporations love because it keeps the fan base alive for their products.

[2.30] **Q:** In your experience, how has fandom changed over the years? How have conventions changed?

[2.31] **A:** In the 1980s I went to a couple of Star Trek conventions and a traditional science fiction convention (set around novelists, as opposed to media-centered conventions). Conventions were listed in the SF trade magazine, *Locus*. Even though you would find a group of fellow fans it was still considered a bit strange to go to such conventions. Now it's considered cool. I remember attending a convention in the early 2000s, and Neil Gaiman was the guest author. Due to the widespread popularity of his Sandman series a lot of young people attended the convention. His fan base helped make conventions cool again.

[2.32] More recently, with the popularity of genre films, such as Spider-Man and large action films, Comic-Con becomes the default media-centered/saturated convention where it is the mainstream. You attend that con, and you're not considered to be on the fringe. My documentary about people wanting to go to Mars, *Dreams from a Red Planet*, was screened there in 2006.



Dreams from a Red Planet from Kurt Lancaster on Vimeo.

Video 3. *Dreams from a Red Planet* (2006).

[2.33] I have students in some of my classes who consider it cool to attend the Phoenix Comic-Con. The popularity of such shows as *Big Bang Theory* (2007–) and other types of the promotion of nerd culture—perhaps the coolness of Apple's Steve Jobs and the rise of new media technologies and the coolness of owning and operating new technologies birthed this notion of coolness—has led to a shift in the social consciousness about science fiction conventions over the past 20 to 30 years.

[2.34] **Q:** Have you any other work planned in the future focusing on fan studies?

[2.35] **A:** No. In many ways I've said all that I need to say in my books (with chapters on *Warlocks & Wardrive*, and in my published dissertation, *Interacting*

with *"Babylon 5"*). I could certainly apply these concepts to the new fan communities being built today around a variety of different fantasy environments, but others can do that too. My work has shifted because I'm getting more people reading my film and documentary books than read my work on fan studies.

[2.36] **Q:** Your work has transitioned into documentary; do you see the two fields (documentary and fan studies) as related?

[2.37] **A:** Documentaries tell the stories of our time. There are very few good documentaries about fan culture. I'm currently working on a documentary about some of the people who hang out at The Geekery, the game store in my university town. Communities are being built around *Magic: The Gathering* tournaments. People may be trading cards, playing a game, but how they play—how they performed in the game—gets discussed after the game among friends, and that's where the real game is played; that type of community building is what allows the games to continue. If someone just came in and played and walked out afterward without talking to anyone or hanging out and discussing their mistakes and their wins, then the heart of the game would be empty of meaning. The community revolving around the games is the real game that gets performed. At tournaments, people from a fan base of a particular store will wear a store T-shirt. If they get knocked out of a round early, they'll go over and watch one of their friends in a match, giving them support. They'll also step back out of earshot and talk about a bad or missed play by that person. They're discussing how they would have responded—or performed—in the game.

[2.38] **Q:** Is there anything you wish you'd been able to cover in *Interacting with "Babylon 5"*?

[2.39] **A:** I'm proud of the work in with *Interacting with "Babylon 5."* I feel that it is complete and provides a strong, fully developed case study of how a particular universe—created by Straczynski—gets reiterated in other forms, like card games, tabletop role-playing and war games, computer games, and fan fiction. Each one provides a different way for fans to enter that universe and become part of its collective story. If *Babylon 5* as a television series is the myth text, then all of these other forms become the way people perform in the myth, similar in many ways to ancient Greek playwrights writing stories about their central myths. If I were to do it over, I would look at *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *The Lord of the Rings* as models since these are mainstream and it would have

generated a wider readership. But I'll leave that for others to do.

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